The Builder.

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SATURDAY, APRIL 10, 1847.

AT the end of November last, we were the first to communicate to the public the precise nature of the alterations that were contemplated in Covent Garden Theatre, embracing, with the concurrence of the official referees, important provisions for the safety of the public in the event of fire.* Afterwards, we had the satisfaction of entirely setting at rest, by a personal survey, reports against the stability of the walls, then current; and we now give our readers an elaborate and correct view† of the new interior, which has been constructed in a marvellously short period, and with great skill and effect. Not many weeks ago, as we noted at the time, we had seen the bare inclosing walls standing exposed, from the foundation to the roof, and the old chandelier, under the decorated ceiling, blazing in extraordinary contrast with the hubbub and apparent ruin below. And when we entered the theatre on Tuesday night last, on which occasion it was first opened for operatic performances, the change that had been effected appeared little short of miraculous, although we had watched the progress step by step.

A main point to be dwelt on is, that notwithstanding the rapidity with which the works have been carried on, they have been done in the soundest and most substantial manner, and so as to entitle Mr. Albano, the architect, and all concerned in them, to great praise. A brief record of the proceedings, before speaking of the appearance of the house, will doubtless interest many of our readers.

We may premise, that Covent Garden Theatre, as we used to know it, was erected in 1809 by Mr., now Sir Robert, Smirke; the previously existing building having been burnt down. The first stone was laid by the Prince of Wales and the Freemasons on the 31st of December, 1808, and the building was erected and opened within nine months from that day. It is reported that the cost was 150,000*l.*;

Turning, then, to the present structure, operations were commenced on the 2nd of December last; but during the week there were only a few workmen employed, in consequence of not having entire possession of the house. The first steps included moving away an immense quantity of theatrical property, which had been stored for years in various parts of the theatre, and was useless. Our grandfathers might have had their earliest theatrical recollections revived, by tricks and scenery belonging to the palmy days of pantomime, which had long slumbered mid dust and cobwebs.

The work was then begun in earnest, by pulling down the whole of the interior of the theatre within the external walls, and the inner foundation walls and arches, to the depth of about 22 feet below the level of the pit corridor. The new foundation walls for carrying the iron columns for the fronts and backs of boxes (thrown considerably farther back), and the walls for the new stone staircases, were commenced about the 21st of December, by bedding Yorkshire landings on a good gravelly soil, with four double courses of footings in brick and cement, five bricks thick at the base. Between the new foundation walls and the old main walls, fire-proof arches were turned in brick and cement over two rooms immediately under the level of the ground floor, and a second tier again above these, under the level of the pit tier of boxes and corridor. When these were completed, the fixing of the stone bases was commenced, to receive iron columns (from 6 to 8 in. in diameter) which were fitted into deep sockets, their caps carrying the timbers of the grand tier, which were secured with bolts going through the caps, and were fastened to the main walls by strong iron ties, passing through the walls with nuts and washers. These caps carried the columns and timbers of the next tier; and, in like manner, columns were repeated for each of the tiers, thus obtaining a continuous bearing from the foundation walls. The columns are 10 feet 4 inches apart in front, and 11 feet 6 inches apart at the back of the boxes. The last tier of columns had flanches cast on them to receive strong story-posts, which were framed into the roof. While the timbers of the upper tier were being framed, the carpenters and joiners were proceeding with their work in the various tiers of boxes and corridors, and framing the timbers and curbs of the ceiling: these are carried by cantilevers framed into the story-posts beforementioned. The ceiling, besides, was hung to the roof with strong iron straps and straining pieces, which gave ground for a foolish report that the new ceiling would bring down the old roof, when, in truth, it is dependant on it only in a very slight degree.

The ribs for the new ceiling, which has a parabolic section, and is elliptical in plan, are formed each of two pieces of plank, cut into proper shape, and lined on the face with ½-inch battens, from 2 to 3 inches wide, nailed to the ribs. This boarding was exposed to great heat for some time, that no shrinkage might afterwards take place, and all chinks were then filled up, and canvass was fastened all over the back of it with a strong mixture of marine glue. These precautions were necessary, because, as the decoration of the ceiling (painted on paper elsewhere, and brought to the house ready at once to be put up) is fastened to the face of the boarding, any shrinkage afterwards would probably split it.

The ceiling, then, being thus made ready for the artists, the painting, gilding, and other decorations (to be afterwards alluded to), and the preparations for hanging the chandelier, were finished, and the scaffolding struck in order to complete the pit and stall seats.

We ought to have said (although it has been already mentioned in this Journal), that when building the foundation walls and cutting the shoulders for the first tier of fire-proof arches, a course of bond timber 12 by 6 and 12 by 9 was found, which, although apparently sound, it was thought necessary to examine. When cut into, it was seen to be entirely rotten at back, and was then taken out in short lengths, and the space filled in with bricks and cement. Other courses were afterwards found in the same rotten condition, and were then removed, to the extent, in all, of about 1,400 feet run. A great number of cills and lintels, to the extent of about 400 feet run, discovered to be in the same state, were also removed, and relieving arches were turned in their stead.*

Simultaneously with the progress of the above works a new box-office and entrance were made: the open-arched arcade in Bow-street was inclosed, and the adjoining rooms extended flush with the façade of the building. A new stage-entrance and stage-staircase, and a large, handsome retiring room, of the whole width of the stage, under the proscenium, have been formed for the convenience of the musicians, with very ready means of access from the street.

The grand entrance has been materially improved; the ceiling of the hall has been raised and divided into panels, filled in with enriched mouldings, supported on Doric columns, which are formed out of the square pillars that formerly supported the ceiling; and the square ends of the walls, and the lintel over the entrance to the grand staircase, have been removed, and a new soffit formed. The steps at the foot of the grand staircase, which projected into the hall, have been taken up and refixed further in, by reducing a very wide landing; gaining a clear height, by raising the lintel, of 3 ft. 6 in., and 2 ft. 6 in. by the removal of the steps. The ceiling of the staircase being found too high to be well-lighted, was lowered. These alterations are important, as a full view can now be obtained of the columns and ceiling of the grand staircase, whereas before only the margin of the cornice at foot of columns on staircase was visible.

The arched colonnade leading from Bow-street to the Piazza, Covent-garden, has been covered in, some of the spaces with doors and some with sashes, and converted into an entrance-hall and crush-room for the pit,—a great convenience. The ceiling is divided into three compartments, with beams and Doric columns; two fire-places have been made in it, and the floor raised. The access to the house here is by a flight of steps right and left. The pit is approached by means of these stairs, and is entered at the back only.

The old gallery-staircase in Bow-street, adjoining the Bedford-avenue, has been pulled down, and the space it occupied formed into a vestibule to the pit crush-room, by turning fire-proof arches over the basement to carry the stone paving. The adjoining room, formerly the treasury, is converted into a cloak and ticket-room, and another room built for the accommodation of the nightly guard.

At the top of the grand staircase, under the floor of the Shakspeare room, where considerable alterations have been made, trusses of timber and iron have been introduced for the purpose of supporting the girders, their bearing being increased by inclosing the arched arcade below. The space the gallery staircase formerly occupied has been floored over and paved level with the saloon and corridor of the grand tier. Two mezzanine floors, one at each end of the grand saloon, have been taken down to give these rooms the same height as the saloon; and by these arrangements have been formed a handsome *suite* of anti and crush-rooms from the grand staircase, the whole length of the front of the theatre. The arched staircase which was formerly in the saloon, communicating with upper tier of boxes, has been taken away, and the ceiling divided into three compartments, supported by Ionic columns and entablature.

The walls of the saloon, we may mention here, are hung with a green watered paper, with white and gold ornamental dressings to the doors and other openings. The woodwork is painted satin-wood; the columns Sienna marble.

Before terminating our notice of the struc-

* Vol IV., p. 470.

† See p. 169 in present number.

‡ An account of the building, with illustrations, will be found in the first volume of Britton's "Public Buildings of London."

* For some remarks on this circumstance, and the use of wood bond generally, see p. 33 ante.

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